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Book Review

The causes of war

David Sobek

Polity, Cambridge, 2009, 229pp., €19.99, ISBN: 978-0745641997

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David Sobek's book provides a concise and readable overview of theoretical approaches in political science to the outbreak of war. The structure of the book progresses from state-level through dyadic to systemic theories of war. Researchers and students in this field will find succinct and lucid renderings of familiar theories – structural realism, balance of power, democratic peace, power transition theory, the influence of trade on the outbreak of conflict and so on. Sobek is effective and (mostly) even-handed in summarizing the various flashpoints, controversies and opposed positions in these debates. The opening chapter will provide any student with a good introduction to the conceptual distinction between theorizing based on general patterns of behaviour and theorizing based on interactive effects, as well as the difference between probabilistic and deterministic theorizing.

One of the major claims advanced in this book is the identification of a limit common to these various conflict theories in that 'they do not equally apply to all contexts across time' (p. 197). Sobek explores these theories concretely in relation to historical case studies appended to every chapter, ranging from contemporary European integration, through the late nineteenth century Meiji Restoration in Japan to the warfare practiced by Hezbollah in Lebanon and the construction of global economic order since 1945.

The historical case studies are designed to provide insight into the limits of these conflict theories. Sobek addresses these limits by identifying several factors that would allow us to thread these theories through specific contexts with greater precision. The three factors identified by Sobek are state capacity, the role of domestic politics and the effect of rationality on international politics. Of these three factors, Sobek's treatment of rationality is the least clear, and in fact seems to be two distinct claims rolled into one. On the one hand, Sobek makes the familiar, even banal, claim about rational non-state actors by asserting that terrorists are not 'crazy' but rational, even if 'asymmetric' in their choice of methods (p. 200).

On the other hand, Sobek seems to hint at a deeper insight about reflexivity and rationality when he suggests that there might be an interactive effect between rationality and the interdependence of states. The greater the



awareness and reality of interdependence, Sobek suggests, the greater the repercussions of specific decisions, and consequently the greater the need for more penetrating and careful weighing of potential decisions (p. 201). In other words, there might be a virtuous cycle at work, with interdependence spurring more effective and rational decision-making. Unfortunately, this intriguing thought is not developed.

Sobek's treatment of his other two factors – state capacity and domestic politics – is more straightforward. As Sobek shows, not only structural realism but a wide variety of conflict theories tend to presuppose a static conception of state functionality, taking the state as an apparatus able to respond and adapt without friction to the pressures of its environment and society in certain predictable ways. If state capacity is treated as variable, then it becomes possible to calibrate these theories more precisely. A state that is not in full control of its territory or society will respond to democratic change in a different way from a stable, well-ordered state. Although the influence of domestic politics on conflict is widely acknowledged in certain theories (most notably in theories of democratic peace), Sobek is keen to point out that domestic politics matters in autocratic states too, as authoritarian leaders still have to draw on the support of specific (although narrower) constituencies in order to maintain their rule.

In so far as Sobek has identified some genuine problems with the lumbering general theories of conflict, his efforts in this regard are welcome. The importance of domestic politics, state capacity and rationality are all well and good. However, there is a self-defeating character to his endeavour in so far as he seeks to capture the effect of historical context through generating yet more ahistoric categories. His argument ends by inadvertently demonstrating the need for greater sensitivity to context.

Take Sobek's examination of liberal pacifism and democratic peace. Sobek does not hesitate to compare the 1896 Fashoda crisis between Britain and France to the Palestinian legislative elections of 2006 in order to explore different permutations of these pacifistic theories. Apart from the incongruity of comparing colonial rivalries between nineteenth century imperialist powers to an ongoing struggle over national rights and self-determination, Sobek's discussion of the Palestinian elections also unintentionally points to a deeper problem with democratization as a tool of conflict management.

Sobek claims that the 2006 elections were held under Western pressure as it was believed that a win at the ballot box would help 'moderate' Hamas (p. 94). This outcome failed to materialize, according to Sobek, because of the belligerence of Palestinian voters and the absence of a coherent Hamas leadership, divided between exiled Hamas leaders in Syria and those who assumed government office in Gaza. Sobek uses this instance to make his case that democracy failed to moderate Palestinian policies due to the lack of a coherent



state structure. Hence, the need to include state capacity as a factor in our theorization of conflict.

Of course, one could say that the lack of Palestinian statehood is precisely what the whole Israeli-Palestinian struggle is about, and therefore the point is moot. There are also other ways to interpret the Palestinian vote for Hamas – for example, as a vote against the venal and subservient rule of the previous Fatah administration more than an expression of atavistic enmity or democratic immaturity. Even Sobek is forced to concede in places that Hamas is more pragmatic than generally assumed (for example, Sobek cites the instance of Hamas downplaying their refusal to recognize the Israeli state, p. 55). The corollary of Sobek's assumption that Hamas are 'extreme' is that other actors, such as Fatah, are then taken to be preferable and legitimate by default, whatever the wishes of the Palestinian people.

More revealing, however, is the response of Israel and the Quartet (the United States, the European Union [EU], Russia and the United Nations) to the election of Hamas. Their response was to collectively punish the Palestinians with an economic embargo and support for the rule of Fatah in the West Bank. Punishment, in other words, for exercising the very democratic rights that the Palestinians had been encouraged to exercise (Sobek only mentions the international response in passing, for example, p. 56). If Sobek is right that it was hoped that democracy would help 'tame' Hamas, the post-election policies of the Quartet reveal that the instrumentalization of democracy as a tool of conflict management has an in-built bias *against* democracy. In these cases, democracy is restricted to those options deemed to be favourable by those promoting democratization. The democratic rights of the people in question come a distant second. But Sobek considers neither the self-defeating nor the anti-democratic character of externally driven democratization or liberalization strategies.

To be sure, some of Sobek's case studies – such as the discussion of nineteenth century Japanese nation-building and the strategic calculations underpinning Nazi expansionism – are better than others. Virtually all the case studies however, are overly reliant on generalizations. They give the impression less of an exploration of the complexities and contradictions involved in matching theorization with historical reality, and more of historical plundering carried out in order to affirm pre-conceived categories and ideas.

Sobek's discussion of the EU as an instance of liberal pacifism for example, is striking for its one-sidedness. Sobek asserts the existence of a 'pan-European democracy' (p. 60) built around 'democratic structures' (ibid.). Such blithe assertions suggest that Sobek is either unconcerned or incognizant of the EU's 'democratic deficit' – the issue that has continuously vexed both supporters and opponents of the Union alike. However successful the EU may be as an institution for dispersing conflict, one could make the case with equal ease



and greater historic justification that the EU has been defined by its anti-democratic character. The callous attitude of the EU to democracy has been typified by the repeat referendums on the Lisbon Treaty that the EU demanded of Ireland in 2008 and 2009. This response made it clear that the range of democratic choice was restricted to a single option – a situation not unlike the expectations that the Quartet powers had of the 2006 Palestinian elections.

These issues notwithstanding, Sobek's book provides good summaries of a wide range of debates in conflict theory alongside a diverse array of historical material and case studies. For these reasons, the book commends itself to the attention of researchers, advanced undergraduates and postgraduates in the field of International Relations theory, Security Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies.

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